Ruling 1411

Chapter 1411

Melanie woke up in the middle of the night to the faint light coming out of Alejandro's study.

She made him a pot of tea and asked, "Not going to sleep?"

Alejandro shook his head. "Couldn't. As long as Seaton's life doesn't end with a horrible death, I won't be able to rest."

"Are you mad… that Seaton tried to murder Mark?" Melanie inquired.

"What? Is it even possible that I might give a sh*t about that?" Alejandro snapped. "No, of course not—it's because he sabotaged my business and murdered so many of my people! Excluding those covered by insurance, I have to fish money out of my own pockets to comfort the families of those who died! Do you know how great Seaton's sh*tty little plot cost me? No, you don't because you're just a woman who knows nothing about this. Go back to sleep."

Melanie knew he was putting on a front again, so instead of leaving, she dragged a chair, placed it next to him, and sat down.

She was donning a conservative nightie consisting of long sleeves and pants way below her knees, yet Alejandro's eyes could not help but linger on her. The curve of her waist teased him in her every movement while the light-pink shade of the nightie only served to accentuate the fairness of her skin. If Alejandro were to be frank, Melanie Lark was way more physically-attractive than Tiffany Lane, and after childbirth, a new aureole of femininity now hung around her.

Noticing the man's eyes, Melanie looked up and considered him, puzzled. "What? I lost my sleep after waking up, too, so I figured we could just talk."

Alejandro's focus was not at all on Melanie's words. "About what?"

Oblivious to the contents currently in Alejandro's mind, Melanie answered solemnly, "Well, I think Mark is a very, very fortunate guy. He actually survived something as gruesome as that—and that's a great relief. Ari and her son aren't left alone because of it, and honestly, I think… there are very few things in life that are better than being together with your family."

Alejandro changed the subject with a tone that suggested he was not paying attention. "Is Melissa asleep?"

Melanie smiled at the thought of her daughter. "Of course. She was a really good girl today. No fuss, no tantrum. Just gently fall asleep while being fed."

Alejandro, unsurprisingly, took it as a cue for his attention to now shift to her breasts. The thought of sleeping on Melanie's well-rounded, perfectly curved hills made him gulp. "You should go back to sleep…" he muttered.

Melanie remained in her seat, and when she spoke again, there was palpable moroseness in her voice. "Ale, I'm so happy and thankful that you survived this. Do you know, when I heard that something had happened to the ship you boarded, I panicked. I was petrified. Then I heard that you were the only one who survived, and I became both crestfallen and relieved at the same time. Do you know how that feels? If something were to happen to you, what were Melissa and I gonna do? I… I don't care that you

don’t love me. All I wish is for you to live well and healthy. Next to the gift of being alive, everything else is trivial.”

“You… really think so?” Alejandro murmured. “Were you truly that worried that I might die?”

“Yes, I was. I am,” Melanie proclaimed, nodding her head solemnly. “Back then, the only thought I had was that I don’t care if you love me or not—it doesn’t bother me. I just want you to live.”

The sincerity in her words seemed to have awakened the humanity deep inside his heart, and in a swoop of passion, he drew Melanie into him and took in her supple, fragrant lips.

Melanie, shocked, instinctively leaned backward. The two of them had not initiated any intimacy nor slept together in the same room since the divorce debacle.

Slightly displeased that her reaction was to flee him, Alejandro put more force in his embrace around her and kissed her even more deeply.

Chapter 1412

As always, there was storm-like rapacity in Alejandro’s kiss. Melanie pushed him away in panic, yelling, “I… I’ll be going now! You, um, rest early too!”

Before she could rise, Alejandro gripped her by her waist. “I want you tonight.”

Melanie was hardpressed to answer him. Part of her welcomed the invitation, yet a larger part of her was repelled by it. It was a strange repulsion that was somehow sowed since giving birth to Melissa. Indeed, carnal impulses occasionally took form in her mind, but she didn't want to realize them. Whenever a chance to indulge in sex presented itself, she would feel repulsed and wished to flee instead.

If she had to pin the cause on something, Melanie would point her finger at childbirth. She had once searched the internet about her condition and found that some women experienced the same thing, but no one seemed to know why it happened.

Overwhelmed, Melanie held onto the desk behind her. "Please don't…"

Alejandro looked up at her rosy cheeks and muttered in dangerous baritone, "Hmm. Don't… what?"

After a three-day-operation of interviewing surviving families of those who died in the shipwreck, Jett's report returned to Alejandro.

His mission had been to observe the families' reaction when they received their solatium. Most, as expected, appeared crestfallen and grief-stricken despite how long ago the shipwreck was. Only one family reacted contrary to the norm: when money was presented to them, the surviving member reportedly laughed aloud.

It was unsurprising that they became Alejandro's target. Soon, he was on his way to the village where the target's farmhouse was.

The owner kept free-ranged poultries in their yard. After an earlier downpour, the road had become sticky with mud and poultry feces. The air, meanwhile, was brimming with a very vile stench.

Alejandro immediately frowned after he walked through the main gate. Jett, noticing his boss's expression, passed a handkerchief, but Alejandro waved in refusal. No matter how disgusted he was with his surroundings, the man was committed to endure it.

How else was he going to lure out the clues he needed if not by looking like he was ready to establish rapport?

An old woman with a mope of white-out mane approached them from inside, positively glowing with joy. "Good day, Mr. Smith! What an honor to have you visit us—come in, come in!"

Frankly, she was not as old as she looked; she was probably in her fifties, tops. It seemed more likely that it was the hardship in her trying life that had bleached her hair, making her look older beyond her years. However, right now, she looked like she had just received one of the best news she had in her life, so much so that she was shining with jubilance. Abject poverty and all the other pesky troubles associated with it no longer bogged her down—the old woman looked as triumphant as someone who had found a secret way up the social ladder.

Alejandro went inside and stared at the little stool the old woman had supplied him as his "chair." There was a layer of tarry, unknown coat on its surface, and he watched her scrub against it a few times without any of it coming off.

"Oh, deary me, how embarrassing. But this is the only thing our poor family has for a chair, and now that our dearest Jeffrey is gone, we are supposed to go worse. All thanks to you though, Mr. Smith, for being such a kind man and giving us money. It is such a relief for me," the old woman crooned.

The man she mentioned—Jeffrey Orange—had been one of the sailors under the Smith company's transportation company. Including the date when the shipwreck happened, he would have worked in the company for exactly three years.

Alejandro flashed her a slight smile and sat on the stool. "It's within my responsibilities. Jeffrey Orange's unfortunate passing is my company's fault, so an amount of solatium is the least we could do. Excuse me, Ma'am, but do you live alone?"

The old woman pulled her jacket—so dirty that no one could tell what its original color was —tightly around herself. "No, my daughter-in-law is with me. You know, Jeffrey's wife? She's feeding the pigs in the back."

Chapter 1413

As they talked, a younger woman crossed into the yard. Sallow skinned, she donned a pair of rain boots, her hair unkempt and messy after an uncaring treatment by the breeze, her hands full with a dirty bucket full of pig feed. Noticing strangers in her house, the woman became wary, and she remained standing in the yard with no signs of coming inside.

The older woman walked up to the door and called, "Sarah, sweetie, come in! Mr. Smith has come to see us. Oh, look at how splendid these city men are! They wear good, look good, and are so, so rich."

Alejandro, who hated sitting on that stool, took this as a chance to leap on his feet and approached the yard. "Good day, Mrs. Orange. I'm Alejandro Smith—your husband's boss."

The woman nodded and said nothing. She seemed to be a very reticent, taciturn woman; no one could tell if this was her nature or if there was another reason behind it.

In comparison, the old woman was overly talkative. “Oh, Mr. Smith, don’t you mind her. We women in backwater places are fools; we don’t know what to say, you know, being so clueless about the world out there. No disrespect, Mr. Smith.”

It was clear to Alejandro that this old woman was an old slick, so if he wanted to fish information out, he needed to target the younger woman. “Mrs. Orange, wouldn’t you join us inside?” he asked. “It’ll only take about a few minutes.”

Sarah was reluctant. “He’s gone. There’s nothing to talk about anymore. The money you people gave is also more than enough. Excuse me, I have much more farm work to do.”

Alejandro saw nothing resembling sadness in Sarah’s complexion. Can money truly erase so much anguish?

“You see, Mr. Orange had worked in my company for three full years, which means he’s eligible to receive more solatium than most others,” Alejandro said, casting a bait. “I’m only here to verify his identity. I can’t let what is owed remain unfulfilled.”

Sarah did not show any avarice. “Just talk to my mother-in-law,” she intoned.

On the other hand, hearing that there was more money on the way brought a wide-splitting grin out of the old woman’s face. “God Almighty, there’s more for people who’ve worked for more than three years? Oh, now that you mention it, yes, he’d worked for almost three years!”

“There is a condition though, Ma’am. I need to verify his identity with his spouse before I greenlight this extra compensation,” Alejandro politely said. “So, please, let me talk to Mrs. Orange.”

The old woman immediately dragged the woman into the house against her will. “You are talking to Mr. Smith, Sarah! I’ll be making something hot!”

The woman’s jitteriness became even more pronounced once she was inside, her eyes evading Alejandro’s while her hands folded together. She looked frantic—panicked.

Alejandro went straight for the shot. “Has Mr. Orange returned lately?”

Sarah stiffened and lowered her head even more. “He’s dead.”

Alejandro chuckled lightly. “That may fool others, but not me. You have to hide from the law and live in the shadows all because of a couple of unlawful Benjamins. And what’s the point of having money if you have to live like rats? Can’t even live a day without guilt. He’s now living the sweet, rich life, but you and your old lady? You women are stuck here. You’re gaining literally nothing from shielding him, are you? Who knows, maybe right now, he’s got his arms and god-knows-what-else in other women. Sure, doubt me all you like, but I wouldn’t if I were you. His profession puts him out there all the time, and he only comes home a few times within a year. He loves indulging himself—uninhibited—after work, Ma’am. I can even give you proof if you don’t believe me.”

Chapter 1414

Sarah’s face turned pale. “Stop it, Mr. Smith. As long as he still sends home money, I don’t care what game he plays out there. Ain’t this how life is? I stay at home and take care of his old ma and our kid; he goes outside, sweating his blood and tears making money. I understand if he wants to have fun

sometimes, it's fine. But now, he's dead. We don't mind any amount of money you give, so if there's nothing more to say, then excuse me."

Alejandro dropped the affected cordiality in his voice. "I'm sure you already know: if I ever find his a**, I'll make him as dead as he's supposed to be. He's already dead in the eyes of the law, right? So what's wrong with killing a dead man, hmm? Not even the cops think he's alive. Now, since I know he's alive, I won't stop until I find him, whether it's with your help or not. Don't worry though, after I'm done with your dear husband, I'll make sure I send his severed head to you just to let you know how he's holding up. After all, you people have already accepted the money I've given you for his 'accident.' He's dead, you say, so how could we let him live?"

Sarah shot panicked glances at the kitchen as though hoping that the old woman would come out and rescue her. She was on the verge of unraveling.

Alejandro upped the ante, continuing. "Oh, I wouldn't count on an old lady to save me. I know there's another guy who survived the shipwreck other than Mark Tremont and myself, and that other guy is Jeffrey Orange. I also know all of the little sleights he has done too, so you tell me where the hell is he right now and I'll give you enough money to live the rest of your life with no trouble. Think about it, this is your way out of this sh*thole! A man like Jeffrey doesn't deserve you wasting your life, devoting to him!"

Sarah started to shudder. "I told you, I don't know! I don't know what you're talking about! He's dead! Dead!"

The older woman finally walked out of the kitchen, and Sarah dove behind her.

A smattering of pitter-patters began to drape over the village—it was raining. Smokes began to come out of chimneys afar. It was a rather scattered village, with each of the houses being very far apart from one another.

Alejandro, his patience depleted, raised his hand and beckoned to his men outside. His bodyguards burst into the house, tackled the two women, and locked them into a sprawling position on the floor.

The old woman, not expecting Alejandro to become so antagonistic, shook so hard that even her wrinkles were jittering along with her. “M-Mr. S-Smith, what is the meaning of this? Did Sarah say something stupid?”

Alejandro lit up a cigarette and let the smell of nicotine take over the house’s innate stench. He took in a deep breath and said noncommittally, “She didn’t say anything stupid, per se. The two of you just happened to do something stupid instead. Last chance, where is Jeffrey Orange?”

A mother’s instincts to protect her son spurred the woman into lying through her teeth. “He’s dead!”

Alejandro crouched close to them and exhaled a puff of smoke over the old woman’s face. “Okay, I’ll buy. So, he’s dead… By the way, I heard you’d got a grandson, haven’t you? Seventh grade, boarding school, comes home every Friday—which would be tomorrow. But, of course, you might not get to see him come home this time, unless… you make the right choice. Grandson, or son? Pick one.”

Now, it was Sarah’s maternal instincts kicking into high gear at the thought of her son being threatened. “No, I’ll talk! I’ll tell you everything! Just don’t touch my son!”

The old woman shot her daughter-in-law the stinkeye. “What are you blabbering about? It’s all a hoot, daft girl! This country is ruled by the law!”

Her indignant proclamation made Alejandro laugh. “The law, you say? Have you never seen how black and dirty this world could be? Your own son murdered a ship filled with people, but where’s his comeuppance? He fled! What did the law do to him? You want to protect your murderer son from his just desserts while also wanting your grandson not to suffer his father’s crime. You just want everything, don’t you? It’s ridiculous how shameless you are,” he jeered. “Now speak, where is Jeffrey? If you speak, I’ll let him live, since he’s only someone else’s puppet. But if you remain silent, then you can start prepping for your grandson’s funeral, along with your son’s in the more distant future.”

The resolve in the old woman’s face began to see signs of hesitance and doubt, but her mouth remained sealed. Sarah, however, was already begging tearfully. “I’ll talk, I’ll talk about everything! This has got nothing to do with us or our children, so please don’t hurt my son! We only knew what Jeffrey did after the shipwreck happened, okay? Before he ran away, he came home, left us some money, then ran away at night. He didn’t tell me where he went. I asked what happened, and he told me everything, then said I can’t tell no soul about this. He said that once this whole… storm blows over, he’ll buy a house and we’ll all move there. He said he struck a jackpot. He hasn’t come home for such a long time, never! Just calls us every once in a month to tell us he’s still alive, but the call’s only about ten seconds or something; he never talks more than a minute!”

Chapter 1415

All Alejandro needed was for one of them to talk.

He signaled his man to release the woman from his clutch, but Sarah remained kneeling on the floor, too petrified to stand. “I know Jeffery must have done something sinful—something against the Lord—and I don’t wanna protect him, but he’s my husband and my son’s father. I have no choice!”

Alejandro tossed his cigarette butt out to the yard. With a faint frizzle, its last ember died, drowning in damp soil. “I get you, Mrs. Orange, which is why I need you to call Jeffrey right now and tell him to come

home. I don’t care what excuse you make. I just want him here. I’ll wait, but if he doesn’t show up tonight, your son won’t show up tomorrow.”

“W-what happens then?” Sarah asked, her voice trembling. “What’ll you do to him—kill him?”

“Don’t you call!” The old woman cracked out a shrill.

The bodyguard reacted by slapping her, which Alejandro tacitly approved by not stopping him. “Oh, no. I still need a witness, after all. If he does as he’s told obediently, I guess spending a decade or so in prison should suffice. The person I want to kill isn’t him, but the man who used him to do his bidding.”

Incarceration was obviously a better choice than death, so Sarah immediately grabbed an old, worn-out phone and called Jeffrey despite her mother-in-law’s protests.

It took a long time before the other side finally picked up her call. There, Jeffrey’s acrimonious voice snapped. “B*tch, haven’t I told you to never call me? I’ll call you when the damn time’s right!”

Sarah considered Alejandro fearfully for a moment and replied, “U-um, your ma had a fall in the yard just now, and the doctor said she hurt her head, and the surgery is gonna cost a ton, but it might save her for real. J-J-Just come back, okay? There’s so much stuff at home; I can’t handle them all.”

Jeffrey might have been unscrupulous enough to become complicit in mass murder, but he still had enough heart in him for his mother. “My ma fell? F**k you, b*tch! I thought I told ya to work so she doesn’t have to! How the hell did she fall? Christ, what’s the point of having you around, you useless c**t! You don’t know I’m outside, do you? Even at my quickest, I can only reach home before sunrise. I don’t exist as a citizen no more, so I can’t take a plane or a train or whatever, remember? I can only ride

them illegal cars! For f**k's sake, when I get back, I'll teach you a lesson so hard, you'll remember my face when you look into the mirror!"

It was at that moment that steely nonchalance dawned onto Sarah's mien. It displaced her fear, and suddenly, she looked downright uncaring. Sarah had enough of Jeffrey.

She replied flatly, "We'll talk about this once you're home. I'm waiting."

The bodyguard released his grip from the old woman's mouth after the call ended.

Gone was Sarah's erstwhile jitteriness and hesitance; she now looked as though she had never been this determined and firm with a decision before. "You're right, Mr. Smith. Jeffrey Orange is a piece of sh*t who don't deserve me and my life."

Alejandro signed a cheque right there and then and passed it to her. "Here's your reward. Enough to live comfortably for the rest of your life."

She accepted the cheque without revealing any joy. In a low voice, she muttered her thanks.

Alejandro, the bodyguards, and Jett remained inside the farmhouse for the rest of the day. For good measures, Alejandro had asked his people to park their cars as far away as possible to avoid drawing Jeffrey's suspicion.

When dusk fell, Sarah killed one of her chickens to prepare dinner for herself and her “guests.” Although the environment she lived in was uncomfortably dirty, Alejandro noticed that the food utensils were rather sanitary, so he accepted Sarah’s invitation, and they dined together.

The old woman struggled and fought, so she ended up tied to a chair. Sarah hated her ruthless termagant of a mother-in-law, who had loved to maltreat and abused her in the past, but she still went out of her way to feed the old woman water.

Alejandro did not stop nor encourage her, so Sarah dared not give the old woman food. Despite her goodwill, the old crone would not stop bawling about the woman being a Satan’s spawn who not only cursed the family but also wanted to kill her own husband.

Incredibly, Sarah remained stoic to all of her philippics. One could only assume that it was because she had gotten accustomed to it. Alejandro, however, did not, so in a fit of frustration, he had his men stuff a piece of cloth into the termagant’s mouth.

Later that evening, Alejandro had a cigarette after dinner under the roof outside while Sarah continued her chores, cleaning up the yard and rounding all poultries back into their pens. The foul stench that had seemed so intrinsic to the farmhouse lessened, and the freshness of rural air compared to the city began to show. After a downpour, the air was so minty fresh that every breath taken in was akin to a gentle cleansing to a person’s lungs.

Alejandro only started chatting with Sarah after she finished her work. “So, what do you plan to do in the future?”

Chapter 1416

The woman’s gaze went blank for one second. “I don’t know. I’ll probably take my son and hightail out of here, as far as we can go. The Oranges are a difficult bunch. It’ll be my fault that Jeffery’s going to

prison, and the old bat won't let me get away with it. I'm also scared that Jeffery would take revenge on me after his release. So, I have to get as far away as I can."

Alejandro agreed with her train of thought. "That's right. That's exactly what you should do. Instead of serving an ungrateful family, why not live a carefree life? I don't see any sign of happiness on you. Life is hard enough. Why add difficulties? It's best to live out your life comfortably, regardless of whether you have money or not."

The woman packed her and her son's luggages in her free time. It looked like she had decided to leave immediately once Jeffrey was taken into custody.

The old woman sat tied to the chair with her mouth gagged, weeping to the skies, as if she were trying to commit suicide with her tears.

They waited until 4AM. It was hours before daylight. The village was quiet, so one could hear the sound of a nearby car very clearly. The village was built with cement roads, so transportation was moderately convenient. Jeffrey drove back home.

Alejandro had his bodyguards stand guard behind the door, waiting for Jeffery to walk in.

The woman heard the sound of the car too and was unmoved.

Soon, they heard a mess of footsteps from the garden. Jeffrey Orange was not alone.

Jett and two other bodyguards braced themselves. The door opened. There were two other gangster-like men aside from Jeffrey, but they were subdued at once.

It took Jeffrey a while before he returned to his senses. He couldn't see Alejandro's face and only saw his expensive leather shoes. He knew he couldn't escape. "You b*tch, what the hell is this? I thought you said that my mom's fallen down?" he roared loudly at the woman.

The woman remained calm. "Oh, I really hope she does. If she falls to her death, even better. I'm sorry that it didn't happen. You're still alive too, you as*. I've had enough of our marriage. I'm leaving you."

Alejandro gave Jeffrey a kick, then stepped on his face. "Do you know who I am? Do you know why I'm here?"

Jeffrey's heart froze. "M-Mr. Smith…"

Jeffrey had heard of the Smith family's tactics, so he panicked and wet himself.

The air was filled with the smell of pee, which made Alejandro frown. He took two steps back in disgust. "You've got some f*cking nerve, doing shady business by killing people. Your time's up, Jeffrey Orange."

Jeffrey was afraid of death. "It ain't my fault, someone paid me to do it. It really ain't my fault," he pleaded. "Make him pay instead. I just did it for the money!"

“Who told you to do it?” Alejandro asked.

When Jeffrey hesitated, Jett kicked him. He immediately came clear. “It… It was Seaton S. Bart! That big shot businessman, Seaton S. Bart! I’m dead anyway, whether I sell him out or not… Mr. Smith, let me off. I’ll do anything!”

Chapter 1417

Alejandro was suspicious. “Seaton spoke to you, personally? He let you know who he was? Is he that careless?”

Jeffrey spilled the beans. “I’ve been living in the big city for a long time. Of course, I’ve seen those famous business people on the news, even if I don’t meet them in person. Seaton’s men took me to a mansion. I’ve never seen such a nice house in my life. Seaton talked to me with his back facing me, but I could tell that he was foreign. I even saw his picture on the wall, a large frame just hanging on the wall. It was Seaton. He was so generous. I’d never earned that much money in my life, so I was brainwashed by the money he offered. That’s why I agreed. Please let me go, just this once.”

Alejandro now understood. He asked his bodyguards to release Jeffrey. “If you want to live, Jeffrey Orange, you will testify as our witness like a good boy, tell the judge everything you know.”

Jeffrey was still a clever man. “But… Even if we report him, he won’t get a death sentence. He’s committed an international crime. He’ll be shipped back to his own country. They don’t have death sentences there.”

Alejandro sneered. “Do you really think that I’d let Seaton leave prison alive? Don’t be so naive. If he goes to prison, he’ll die. It’s the same with you. If you ever step out of line, you’re doomed. As long as you agree to be our witness, I guarantee that you’ll leave prison alive. You’ll serve around ten years or

so. You'll get the chance to start a new life after that." Then, he immediately walked out. Jett ordered the bodyguards to take Jeffrey away as well.

After taking Jeffrey in, Alejandro placed him on constant watch, worried that Seaton would send an assassin to silence him, or that Jeffrey would try to escape.

As victims, he and Mark reported Seaton to the authorities. The hearing went smoothly, as they had Jeffrey Orange as their witness. The money that Jeffrey had received from Seaton had become evidence.

Just before Seaton was sentenced to jail, Mark went to see him,

This meeting between former old friends felt different from how it used to be.

Seaton's blonde hair had lost its meticulously maintained glory. He looked haggard. At this point, he could no longer maintain his poise. "Mark, spare me."

Mark stared calmly back at him. He did not see any sense of remorse in his eyes, only surrender. Behind that surrender, was a thirst to make a comeback and have his revenge.

"Why didn't you spare me first?"

Seaton paused for two beats when faced with that question. "We're businessmen, Mark. You should understand ambition. I admit that I was wrong, but aren't you perfectly fine now? I can't go to prison.

Prison would finish me. My hard-earned efforts have all gone to waste. Tell me your conditions, as long as you can spare me."

"Conditions?" Mark snorted. "Do you really think that I need money, or anything else?"

"What the f*ck do you want then?" Seaton growled wildly.

"Why do you think I still stayed in Fawkethyse to see you after the hearing?" Mark asked calmly. "I'm not sentimental about our worthless friendship. I just wanted to tell you this—karma will bite you in the as* someday. Now, not only have you failed to buy my company, I've bought yours. You've lost this gamble. You started it. How does it feel to get burnt by fire, after playing with it?"

Seaton grew agitated and screamed as if seized with madness, "Mark Tremont! Just you wait until I get out of here. I'll make you pay, once I'm out of prison!"

His screams attracted the prison guards' attention, who forcibly dragged him away.

"You'll never get out of there…" Mark mumbled to himself.

The shipwreck had come to a close. Jeffrey was also sentenced to prison for fifteen years.

Chapter 1418

Mark closed his eyes to rest in the plane during their flight back to the country. Alejandro was chattering incessantly next to him. “Could you give me some of the shares from Seaton’s company? Tremont Enterprises has just overcome a critical juncture, and the money you have will be more than enough. I pretty much shared the burden with you, and it’s not like it's our first partnership.”

“30%. Pay up,” Mark agreed swiftly.

Alejandro could tell that he was in a good mood, so he decided to take advantage. “Since you trust me now, can we convert our transportation agreement to an exclusive contract?”

Mark shot him a sidelong glance. “Why are you fixating on that transportation agreement? It’s not like you rely on it to put food on the table. Whacko.”

Alejandro refused to give up. “No one would refuse money. Just say yes or no.”

“I’ll consider it. Continue annoying me and we’ll have nothing to discuss,” Mark snapped, annoyed with him.

Alejandro tactfully stopped talking. At some point, both men found the sight of one another more tolerable.

Mark did not return home immediately when they arrived at the capital. Instead, he bought a bouquet of flowers and went to an old-fashioned grave. Alejandro, who had followed him in the same car, was bewildered. When he saw his surroundings, he immediately went silent.

The sun was shining brightly today. The graveyard was filled with lush greenery. Some gravestones looked worn-out over time while some had fresh flowers placed in front of them.

A gentle breeze brushed across the leaves and the sound of doves could be heard on this bright day.

Alejandro paused abruptly. “You go ahead. I’ll stay.”

Mark glanced at him. “You’re here anyway. Regardless of how much you hate him, you should at least visit him.”

Alejandro hesitated for two seconds, then followed him.

Soon, Mark arrived at a gravestone. The late Mr. Tremont’s name was carved along with an epitaph, which detailed a few loving words in his memory.

Mark placed the bouquet in front of his grave and knelt with one knee. “I still hate you. I’ve never stopped hating you, not even for a moment,” Mark said, speaking to the gravestone.

Alejandro was too afraid to even look at the gravestone. He wondered if the old man would still recognize him, now that he had undergone plastic surgery and looked like a completely different person. He thought of the man who would come to his condo and hold him on occasion. He couldn’t remember the man’s warmth anymore and didn’t feel anything special. Memories of the past only filled him with disappointment and regret.

“Why didn’t you drop me off first? I don’t want to be around these kinds of places,” Alejandro whined in protest when they left the graveyard and got back into the car.

“How many years has it been since you’ve seen your old man?” Mark replied with a half-smile, probably in a teasing manner. “It’s not a bad thing for you to come here and see him too. He even asked me to be more tolerant of you before he died. I guess he should feel some form of consolation, now that I’ve brought you alone. I just don’t want to quarrel with a dead man anymore. He won’t feel guilt or upset anyway. Aren’t the living the ones who continue suffering?”

Alejandro didn’t respond. He hoped to receive his father’s love, more than his own hatred towards him. He wanted his father to love him more than he loved Mark.

Chapter 1419

By the time he arrived back at the Tremont Estate, it was already growing dark.

Arianne knew that Mark would be coming home today, so she asked Mary to prepare a sumptuous dinner beforehand.

“Are you okay with selling off Wynn Mansion?” Mark suddenly asked during dinner.

“I had no choice, we were short on cash back then,” Arianne replied casually. “Besides, you put a lot of money into the renovations. It’s fine. No one was going to live in it anyway, and we would’ve had to spend money on its maintenance.”

Mark knew that deep down, she felt differently. She must've wanted to keep Wynn Mansion, but it wouldn't be easy to get it back, now that it was sold.

"You don't have to get Wynn Mansion back," she said seriously, as if she had seen right through him. "There's no need. It's done. The Wynns have separated, some are already dead. Why should we keep that old mansion? It was supposed to be a keepsake, but it's come into good use, so it's not so bad. The new owners will certainly take good care of it, for the sake of private sentiment. It's fine, really."

Mark didn't answer. He smiled and scooped a helping of food onto her plate.

Aristotle picked up his own plate and pushed it towards Mark when he saw this. The little one was jealous and wanted Mark to put food on his plate too.

Mark indulgently gave Aristotle a serving. "Happy now?"

Aristotle ate his food, feeling satisfied. He was only two years old, but was already good with eating with his utensils. He was very adept and no longer made a mess of himself.

A storm had passed and good news followed. Tiffany's mother, Lillian, was getting married again. That's right, to Johnny Spencer. The pair got along very well and had decided to register. Johnny wasn't good with words, but he was still a romantic guy. He planned on treating Lillian right and doing right by her. So, they decided to have a wedding.

This excited Tiffany. She even helped send out invitations. After all, it was her mother's wedding.

On the day of the wedding, Arianne and Mark arrived together.

Lillian was dressed in a white satin bridal gown and was radiant with joy. She looked ten years younger.

Johnny's eyes gleamed with happiness as he watched Lillian walk down the aisle. It was clear that he dearly cherished the woman before him.

Johnny's son had returned from out of the country. The family was bustling with excitement from their reunion.

That night, on their way home, Mark suddenly asked Arianne, "I don't think we've had a wedding ceremony before. Would you like one? This isn't my first time thinking of it."

Arianne rejected the idea at once. "What for? Our kid is two years old. I don't think we need to. You would've made up for it long ago if you wanted to. There's really no need now; it's kind of weird. There's absolutely no need for these ceremonial things as long as you're with me. The whole world knows that I'm your wife. A wedding isn't important."

"But I'd still like to announce it to the world all over again," Mark replied, curling his lips.

"No. I'm being very serious. I really don't want one," Arianne emphasized, worried that he might actually do it. "There are plenty of civil marriages all over the world. Loads of people choose to simply register. Let's just consider ours to be a civil ceremony. There's no need to feel remorse."

Chapter 1420

“By the way, sir, I need to take a few days off…” Brian meekly spoke up from the driver’s seat.

“Problems with the family?” Mark asked.

“Getting engaged,” Brian chuckled shyly. “I’m going home to officially ask my girlfriend’s parents for permission. It’s kind of our family tradition. We have to be officially engaged before getting married.”

Arianne’s interest was piqued. “That’s wonderful news! You’re finally making it official. Haven’t you been living with your girlfriend for a while? Why’d you have to go through the procedure of an engagement? Why not just get married?”

Brian sighed. “This was a request from my girlfriend’s family. They’re a little old-fashioned so I have no choice. We have to foot a high price for the dowry too—once for the engagement, and another for the wedding. I feel as if all my previous hard work has gone to waste whenever I think of having to empty my savings for this wedding. Actually, the dowry is fine, it’s the bride’s family’s request anyway. But they’ve insisted on having the wedding ceremony here too and demanded a five-star hotel. We have so many relatives, and we’ll have to find accommodations for all of them when they arrive. Calculating the amount alone is enough to break me. Dating is great, getting married is a nightmare.”

As a woman, Arianne did not see anything inappropriate with dowries. “How much does the bride’s family want? It should be fine if it’s within reason. After all, a woman is dedicating her life to you and giving you children.”

Brian raised his hand, showing all five fingers. According to Arianne’s estimation, $7,700 should cover it. “$7,700?”

Brian looked helpless. “$77,000.”

Arianne choked. “Wait… Brian, if I remember correctly, your family isn’t exactly rich, am I correct? Although your salary from Mark is substantial, you live in the capital and living expenses are high. Are you going to put years of savings into the dowry and the wedding ceremony? Is your girlfriend’s family rich? Are they being demanding because they value their dignity? Are they going to take all of the dowry? Will the bride’s family be giving you some dowry too?”

Brian’s expression changed. “No, the bride’s family’s finances aren’t any better than mine, but they seem to think that I have money, since I live in the city. They’re so poverty-stricken that they crave dignity. They never mentioned any dowry for me. They only want dowry from me. They’ve even demanded $15,000 to agree to the engagement. I’ve mentioned their demands for the wedding. Most important of all, the bride’s family wants a house too, a house in the capital. I’m going home to negotiate all of these things with them. It’s been giving me a headache.”

He wasn’t the only one—Arianne and Mark both felt headaches just listening to him. Arianne and Mark didn’t have to go through any procedures when they got married. They stared at Brian’s situation in shock, unable to fully comprehend it.

“Maybe you should… call it quits?” This was Mark’s suggestion for the whole affair.

“If negotiations don’t go well, I’m afraid we’ll have to go with that,” Brian replied, chuckling bitterly. “I’ve been quite unlucky when it comes to love. Big city girls have high standards, I get that. That’s why I chose someone from my hometown instead. I had no idea that they’d be even more demanding than a city girl’s family. It’s scary.”

Brian didn't drive Mark the next day. Apparently, he had gone back to his hometown along with his girlfriend, first thing in the morning.

Arianne was unemployed at the moment. The previous events had exhausted her, so she wanted to take a break and take care of her kid.

On the next day of Brian's time off, a girl arrived, sobbing at the door. Mark wasn't around. Arianne would have suspected Mark of having an affair if he hadn't just returned from being shipwrecked not too long ago.

She invited the girl in. After some questioning, she discovered that the girl was Brian's girlfriend. She couldn't figure out how she managed to find her home.

Based on the situation, Arianne knew that the negotiations had failed. For Brian's sake, she brought a box of tissues and softly asked, "What's wrong?"

"B-Brian an-and I w-went back t-to our hometown t-to discuss our en-engagement," she replied, choking with sobs. "H-he th-thinks that the d-dowry is too m-much. Th-the negotiations f-failed, so h-he l-left. I w-wanted t-to s-see if he's h-here. I c-can't f-find him at all. I've b-been d-dating him for s-so l-long. I-is he r-really g-going to b-break up w-with me l-like that?"

##Arianne was nervous. "H-he's… he's taken leave and hasn't been in. My husband has been the one driving."

Arianne did not want to interfere with someone else's matters, so she did not ask too much. However, the girl whined incessantly. "Do I mean so little to him? His salary is so high, he must've accumulated

quite some savings all these years. Is it too much for me to ask for some bonus? I'll be spending the rest of my life with him; my parents have been taking care of me for over twenty years now, is it too much to ask for some money?"

Arianne gave a wry smile. "It's not too much. It is a custom to give some bonus to uphold the tradition. What did you ask for, may I ask?"

The girl had actually started listing out the items, "A house within the capital, two storeys would be enough. I believe a house would be reasonable in order to get married, is it not? A car of $60,000 in value would suffice, $15,000 for the engagement party, $75,000 for the wedding reception since I want the wedding to be done in a five star hotel. That's all I ask, is it too much?"

Arianne replied honestly. "Yes, it's way overboard."

The girl was startled. "What? It's too much? How's that so? There's a whole street of men waiting to pursue me, each of them way better than him in terms of looks and wealth. I can't just force myself to suffer and marry him!"

Arianne scanned the girl for a moment. She was rather pretty and knew how to do her makeup; she would most definitely be able to make men fawn over her if she cried. Regardless, the girl was expecting too much out of an ordinary person. "Do you know how much a property would cost within the capital? I think the car isn't a big issue, but to ask for that much money for your wedding reception, even asking for it to be done at a five star hotel, it's definitely too much for any person from a normal background to handle, not to mention Brian, who came to the capital to work. Brian does work in the city and is earning quite a hefty salary, but he has his own living expenses to take care of. I do believe he wouldn't have enough in his savings to get married. Apart from that, I don't even think he has enough money to pay for a house without getting a loan. Would you be willing to get a loan with him to buy a house and then repay the loan together?"

Without hesitation, the girl answered, “I would not. Buying a house is his problem and it’s to show his sincerity to the woman. A man without his own house shouldn’t even think about getting married.”

If the girl in front of her wasn’t Brian’s girlfriend, Arianne would have seriously scolded her senseless. Materialistic women were all over the place regardless of how small the city was, and it was only a matter of how materialistic they were. However, it’s no wonder why Brian would walk away from such a selfish and self-centered person. If the roles were switched, Arianne was sure that the girl’s family would not be able to fulfill those requirements either. Why did she have to be so insistent on such monetary requests?

Arianne suppressed her emotions and said, “If he really hasn’t got that much money, even if he gets a loan and fulfills all your requirements and marries you, wouldn’t the two of you have to share the burden and repay the loan later on? Why don’t you think carefully? You are getting married to spend the rest of your life with the person you love, not selling yourself off to another.”

The girl arrogantly said, “He most definitely has that much money! Plus, why would I have to bear the burden of repaying the loan from before the marriage? Has he really not been here? You wouldn’t lie to me, would you?”

Arianne had lost all hope, there was no way she could communicate with her. The girl would be underestimating her if she behaved well in front of her. Arianne coughed twice and immediately put on her appropriately arrogant manner as well. “My dear girl, do you know where this is? This is the Tremonts’ home—Brian is just our family’s driver. Are you not afraid that he would lose his job if you come along here and cause a scene?”

The girl pouted her lips. “I don’t care. If he doesn’t come and find me, I’ll wait for him here until he does!”

Arianne did not bother herself with the little girl any longer. She walked to a corner and called Brian. “Your girlfriend’s here, come over here and settle it.”

Brian exploded the moment he found out about it. “What? I’m on my way now!”